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ABSTRACT

Although fear of death is recorded in the writings of the oldest major religions, the study of death and the fear of death have only occurred for the last few decades. Death education courses have grown in number since the early 1970's. College students participated in an investigation of the effects of death education on death anxiety by completing pre- and post-tests of the Pandey Death Anxiety Scale and the Topics of Thanatology Scale. Students (N=116) in the control group were enrolled in psychology courses, while the experimental group students (N=60) were taking a death and dying course. The pretest showed that the control and experimental groups were similar in their feelings about death anxiety. Results indicated that although death anxiety was unchanged in the control group, the experimental group showed a significant decrease in death anxiety as measured by the Pandey Scale. The pretest-posttest results of the Topics of Thanatology Scale were not statistically significant, although the students in the experimental group scored higher than the control group. (Author/NRB)

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The Effects of Death Education

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A paper presented at the Gerontological Society of America's 33rd Annual Scientific Meeting in San Diego, California, November 23, 1980.

INTRODUCTION

Humans fear death. The history of the fear of death can be found in the writings and philosophies of the oldest major religions (Pandey, 1975). Centuries ago, Indians shot arrows in the air after a warrior had died. The arrows were to scare away evil spirits. Today bullets are used in the final "twenty-one gun salute" of military heroes (Kubler-Ross, 1969). While the rituals of death and dying, as well as the fear and philosophy study of death and the fear it creates in most people has only been ongoing for the last few decades.

This study is an attempt to discover the effects of death education on death anxiety of college students. A general hypothesis would state that merely taking a course in this subject matter would expose an individual enough to the topic so that he or she would be desensitized. When individuals are forced to confront the inevitability of death, they may begin to accept or resolve it in their mind. The result can be a lessening of death anxiety.

Several scales of fear of death (on death anxiety) have been developed (Middleton, 1935; Collett and Lester, 1969; Dickstein, 1972; Pandey, 1975). These scales are of importance in assessing the degree in fear of death in persons as individuals and as parts of social groups. For example, females generally seem to have more anxiety about death than males (Templer & Ruff, 1971; Lester, 1972; Dickstein, 1972).

Other studies of death anxiety include: Dickstein and Blatt, 1965; Feifel and Banscomb, 1973; Templer, 1972; Osarchuk and Tatz, 1973; Kimsey, Roberts and Logan, 1972; Bernstein, 1975 and Simon and Goodman, 1976.

Mostly, what is now being used to rate the fear of death and death anxiety are questionnaires. It can be expected that these "death surveys" will become more refined and probably more subtle in their questioning in the future. This can be expected because current death surveys are more conclusive now than earlier surveys. As was mentioned earlier, current surveys in fear of death all conclude that females fear death somewhat more than males (Templer & Ruff, 1971; Lester, 1972; Dickstein, 1972). In contrast, a much earlier survey by Middleton (1935) found that there was no significant difference between males and females in their fears of death.

Death education courses have been growing in number since the early seventies (Bugen, 1979). Bugen states that " ... death is unamerican for it is contrary to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Bugen, p. 237, 1979). There are at least 1,000 colleges offering courses on death education in the United States (Shneidman in Bugen, 1979). In Bugen's own Death and Dying courses his students scored higher on a "Coping with Death Scale" than did a control group not taking his Death and Dying course (Bugen, 1979). A study by Wittmaier (1979) had contrary results. Wittmaier's Death Education students had more fear of death at the end of the course than did the control group (Wittmaier, 1979). It should be noted that Wittmaier and Bugen used different designs to reach their results. Bugen used a pretest/posttest design using a "Coping with Death Scale" as an instrument. While fear of death and one's ability to cope with death are similar, they are not interchangable. Wittmaier (1979) did not use a pretest. The control group was made up of students who wanted to take his Death Education course, but were rejected. The instrument used in this case was the Templer Death Anxiety Scale (Templer, 1970) modified to allow a variance of opinion on a scale of one to four instead of "true" or "false" (Wittmaier, 1979). Wittmaier's Death Education students did believe that they would feel more comfortable talking to a dying person than did the control group.

It is of some interest to see what kind of person enrolls in a death education class. Levitin and Fretz (1978) compared the differences between students taking a death education course, a sex education course and a general psychology course during the summer semester at the University of Maryland. It was found that the death education students were less likely to have a strong religious belief. The students enrolled in the general psychology course were almost twice as likely to have a recent death experience (in both cases it was usually a grandparent). The death education students did, in general, have much lower scores on a fear of death scale than did the sex education class. Leviton (1975) surveyed death education students on their feelings toward a death education course. Thirty-six percent of the students said they took the course to overcome their fear of death, eleven percent said they took death education in order to help others overcome death fear, another eleven percent felt guilt about death, ten percent were concerned over an impending death of someone else, and eighteen percent were interested in suicide (Leviton, 1975). An experiment was conducted by Bell (1975) concerning differences between death education students as opposed to the general college population. Although it was found that death education students thought more frequently about death, they were more like the rest of the college students.

In addition to the survey method of ascertaining one's feelings about death and dying Kurlychek (1978) lists several other methods. These methods include interviews and psychological measures, such as the galvanic skin response (Kurlychek, 1978). The survey,

or death rating scale, is by far the most popular way to measure attitudes about death. "The technique most often used in recent death attitude studies, and that method with the most normative data, has been the employment of rating scales" (Kurlychek, 1978, p. 39).

METHOD

The subjects for this experiment were 176 graduate and undergraduate students enrolled during the spring semester at Middle Tennessee State University. Four different classes were tested. The testing packet was administered during the first ten days of the semester and the last week of regular classes.

There were two Death and Dying courses offered. This course is a death education course. The texts were: Death: Current Perspectives by Edwin S. Shneidman (1980) and A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial by Ernest Morgan (1980). The afternoon section of this class had 22 participants and the evening section had 38. One of the control groups were undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in The Psychology of Persuasion. This course deals primarily with the psychological methods of attitude change. There were 40 in this group. The other control group was made up of undergraduates enrolled in General Psychology. Death Education is mentioned in the course, but only briefly.

The instruments used were the Topics of Thanantology Scale and the Pandey Scale of Attitudes Towards Death.

Each subject was handed the packet and asked to answer the questions to the best of his/her opinion.

The Topics of Thanatology Scale provided a space which could be marked with an number from zero to five, inclusive. Zero was to indicate low interest, and five was high interest.

Specifically, the statistical hypothesis states that there will be a significant difference, on the $p=<.05$ level, between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group for all three dependent variables. The pretest and posttest differences for all three criterion measures of the control group should not reach the same level of statistical significance. Statistical analysis will be accomplished by using Edward's (1972) technique of computing an analysis of variance of the difference scores (D) of both groups.

RESULTS

Of the three criterion measures in the study, only the

Pandey Scale showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. On the high and low topics dependent variables, the change was not significant, but the experimental group scored much higher in both cases.

Table 1 shows the analysis of variance summary table for the Pandey Scale. The Pre minus Post difference scores were analyzed and it reached predicted significance, ($F = 3.698$, $df = 1.174$, $p \leq .05$). Tables 2 and 3 show the summary tables for the non-significant findings of the high and low topics criterion measure.

Figure 1 shows graphically the deviation scores of the two groups with the Pandey Scale. The Death and Dying class had a mean of -2.9833, and the control classes had a mean of -.6293. The experimental and control regression lines are plotted for the three dependent variables in Figures 2,3, and 4. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations for pre and posttests on all three dependent variables. Here the difference between the classes is readily apparent. While the D measures showed no significant differences, the Death and Dying classes scored much higher.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Table for the Pandey Scale

Source	Sum of Squares	d.f.	Mean Square	F-Ratio	p
Treatment	219.138	1	219.138	3.698	.05
Error	10312.000	174	59.265		
Total	10531.138	175			

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Table for the High Topics Test

Source	Sum of Squares	d.f.	Mean Square	F-Ratio	p
Treatment	133.751	1	133.751	2.543	.11
Error	9149.880	174	52.586		
Total	9283.631	175			

Table 3

Analysis of Variance Table for the Low Topics Test

Source	Sum of Squares	d.f.	Mean Square	F-Ratio	p
Treatment	23.770	1	23.770		
Error	9106.720	174	52.338		
Total	9130.490	175			

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Pre and Posttest Dependent Variables

		Pretest		Posttest	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pandey Scale	exp.	25.298	5.62	22.613	5.46
	con.	25.269	5.51	24.967	5.63
High Topics	exp.	19.400	3.94	17.191	3.92
	con.	16.218	5.58	15.122	5.56
Low Topics	exp.	11.045	5.20	9.226	4.86
	con.	7.059	5.31	6.2375	4.89

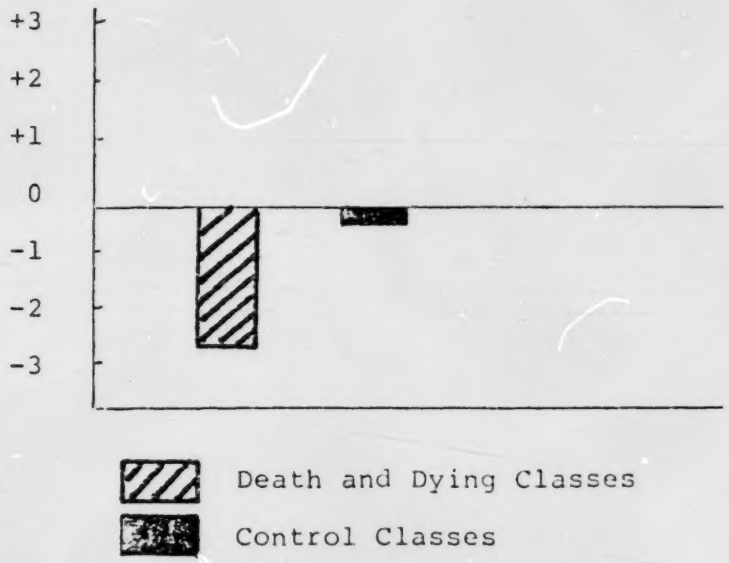

Figure 1

Difference Scores for Death Classes and Control Classes with Pandey Scale

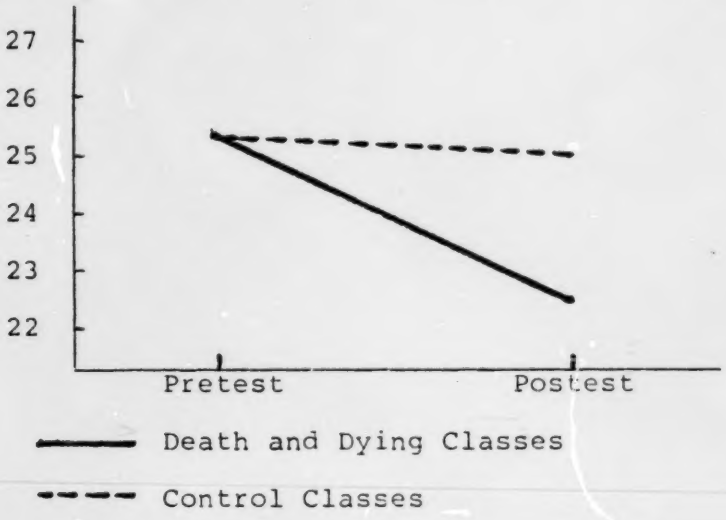

Figure 2

Regression Lines for Death and Dying Classes and Control Classes Pandey Scale

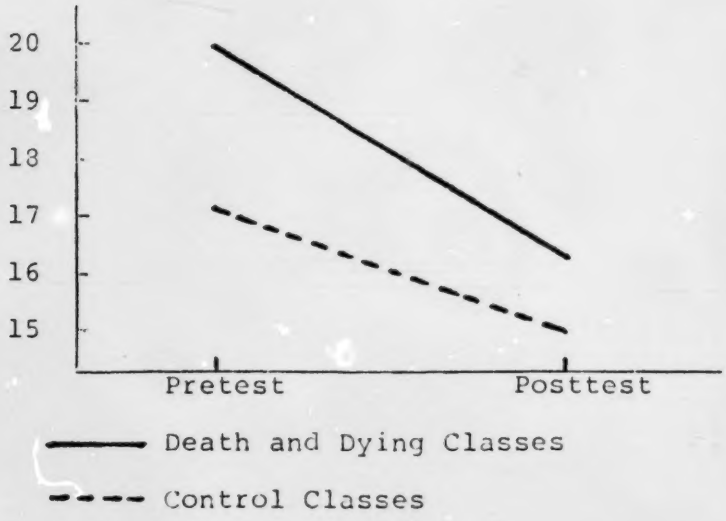

Figure 3

Regression Lines for Death and Dying Classes and Control Classes (High Topics)

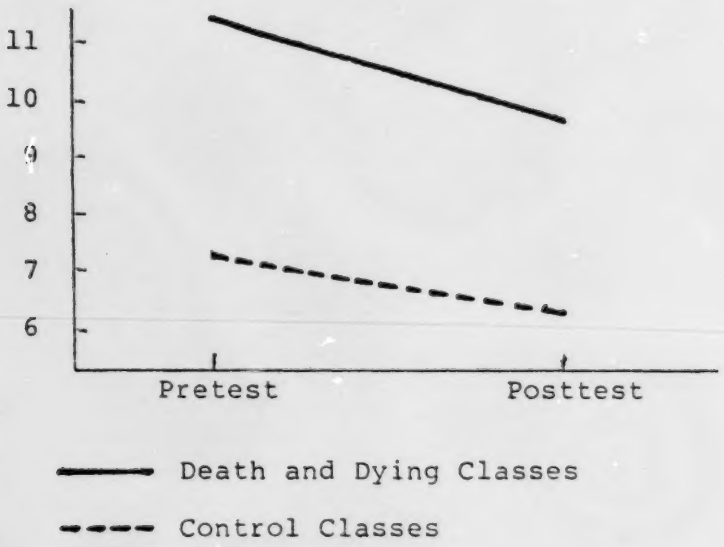

Figure 4

Regression Lines for Death and Dying Classes and Control Classes (Low Topics)

Discussion and Conclusion

The data supports the hypothesis that death education results in lower death anxiety. The control groups remained fairly constant in their views of death anxiety when measured by the Pandey Scale (Figure 2), while the experimental groups showed a decline. The students who enrolled in the Death and Dying course had a slightly higher fear of death on the pretest than the control groups; however, it was not significant. This seems to be in conflict with the findings noted by Leviton and Fretz (1978) which found death education students scored lower on a fear of death anxiety scale than their control group.

The Pandey Scale is a good death attitude scale. It seems to be more subtle and sophisticated than other attitude scales such as the Templer Death Anxiety Scale. The changes of death attitudes were significant ($p \leq .05$). However, more sophisticated tools to measure death anxiety are needed. Even the motive of the Pandey Scale should be relatively easy for an intelligent person to discern. A more subtle and inobtrusive scale should be devised for the future. The Topics of Thanantology, if developed further, could be that instrument. While the results of this study were inconclusive concerning the Topics Scale, the death education students did score higher on this scale. Apparently, there is something which causes some sort of different reaction among persons taking this scale as opposed to more traditional scales. Obviously, there are going to be less demand characteristics asking someone to rate a subject on a scale of zero to five like cryonics than asking someone a battery of questions to agree with or disagree with like: "Corpses frighten me." It is of some interest to note that the scores on the pretest were higher for the Topics of Thanatology Scale than the posttest, in both high and low topics (Table 4). Perhaps the most interesting observation which can be derived from the Topics of Thanatology is that the standard deviations for the high topics division of the scale are smaller for the experimental group (3.94 on the pretest and 3.92 for the posttest) than for the control group (5.58 for the pretest and 5.56 for the posttest). The standard deviations are about the same in all other testing situations (Table 4). Apparently, persons who enroll in a Death and Dying course appear to be in more agreement of what they like most (as opposed to other college students) but they are about equal to other students in terms of agreement about what they are least interested in. Further correlations are definitely needed concerning the Topics of Thanantology Scale.

At any rate, it would appear that death education courses do reduce death anxiety by students. However,more sophisticated methods and instruments are needed to study this subject that has greatly disturbed human beings since they have been old enough to reason. The value of reducing anxiety, especially anxiety of the

inevitable, cannot be overemphasized.

Martin (1975) writes on an existential view of death. According to Martin, the problem with death is that man knows in his heart that he must die. No one can take his place in death. Fear of death is something that cannot be faced, defeated and then forgotten. It can never be defeated; it must be faced throughout life. Martin gives advice on how to free oneself of death anxiety: "... If I fully comprehend what it means for me to die and I consequently live my life authentically,.. I have done all that is possible. I have conquered death insofar as finite human beings are capable of doing so. I have approached death and life with a comprehended acceptance of their true significance, and from this understanding comes the courage to anticipate death with equanimity." (Martin, 1975, p.110).

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